

If You Give a Social Worker a Classroom: Reflections of a First-Time Social Work Educator

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Abstract

This article explores the reflections of a social worker during her first semester as a teaching assistant for an undergraduate social work course during her doctoral studies. It presents her narrative experience in adapting to the role of educator and integrating this role with her identity as a social worker. Specifically, it discusses purposefulness, balance of interests and concerns, dual role issues, self-awareness, and challenges in grading and ethics for a social worker turned educator by means of relating subjective experiences and reflections.

Keywords: social worker, identity, roles, gatekeeping, educator, instructor, challenges

I am a social worker. Even before I began practicing social work, it seemed that this field was in my blood. As is the case for many social workers (Litten, 2008), I felt I had a calling to the field. So when I went back to school to begin my PhD in social work, I was prepared to learn, work, and study like a social worker: long hours, great responsibility, and tons of paperwork. What I was not as prepared for was teaching undergraduate social work students as a teaching assistant. I had never taught in an official capacity before, and certainly not as a primary instructor at this level.

To prepare, I researched numerous techniques and strategies for beginning instructors. One of the most useful techniques for me became that of personal reflection through journaling. As Boud (2001) and Purcell (2013) have discussed, self-reflection can help teachers prepare themselves, increase their confidence, enhance their learning, and evaluate their practices, among other benefits, and my experience with journaling was no different. I chronicled my experiences and reflections each week I taught, and I found in my reflections an overarching theme of how my identity as a social worker informed my role as an instructor for others.

She's Going to Want to Have a Purpose

By our third class, I felt the course seemed to be going well. The students were willing to discuss the material ad nauseam with wonderfully critical thoughts and insights that I was joyfully overwhelmed at hearing, and I was already impressed by the culture the class and I had created in our first two meetings.

I began this particular lesson using an adapted idea from the doctoral director, asking the students to write down four things that they had learned in the previous class. I felt that this would be useful for their retention and also for evaluating my competence. After the students left, I read their answers. I was immediately touched by some of them, and as I read more, I became increasingly proud of what they had learned because of my teaching. I went back to school for my doctorate in social work because I wanted to make a difference in the knowledge we have in the field-- both by teaching future social workers and by conducting research for them to utilize. However, I recognized that this was somewhat of an idealistic

picture of what becoming a university professor would actually be like, and I did not truly expect to have as much of an impact as I fantasized I would.

Reading the answers that my students gave regarding what they had already learned in such a short period was a remarkable experience for me. As I read their comments, I thought of the many helping professionals currently in the field that do not know some of the basic principles the students detailed. Some of their responses applied not just to social work, but also to life. I was struck by the effect I had and could have on these students and potentially the future of social work, and I felt proud.

On our first day, I told my students that it was very unlikely that they would all get A's in the course. I told them that as much as I cared about their success, my main concern was for their future clients. Not only would their future clients far outnumber the students who sat in my classroom, but they would look up to my students, expecting them to know how to help in their tremendous times of vulnerability and need. I explained that what was important to me, as their instructor, was not to give them all pleasing grades, but to make sure that they had the information, tools, and resources that they would need to be the amazing social workers that our clients deserve and require. After reading their responses and listening to their discussions that week, I began to feel that this meaningful goal might not be as fanciful as I had imagined.

Once She Has a Purpose, She'll Probably Fumble in Application

The week my teaching was observed was the first time the students and I had a visitor, and I was surprised by how nervous I became after beginning class. I found that I had difficulty remembering where I was planning to go with different subjects, forgot what one of the bullets on my PowerPoint was about, and felt utterly lost a few times throughout this portion of class.

Being a self-aware social worker, I am cognizant of the common pitfalls I tend to run into whenever I am especially nervous, such as speaking quickly and beginning sentences before knowing what I am going to say. Knowing this about myself, I have become adept at preparing myself before entering nerve-racking situations so as to avoid these obstacles, but this time I was not prepared for my anxiety. I had become rather comfortable in my role in the classroom, and although I recognized I might be more nervous than usual, I had not envisioned just how difficult I would find this situation.

About fifteen minutes into class, I realized how tense I had become. My mouth was dry, the slides I had created a few days earlier were suddenly unfamiliar, and I began talking before knowing what I would say. I urged myself to remember some of the pedagogical advice I had researched before my first few classes, such as giving the students time to reflect and respond after asking a question that no one immediately jumped for, as everything that had felt natural the weeks before now felt methodical and odd. After a couple of uncomfortable fumbles and hot flashes, it was finally time for our break. The students dispersed or pulled out electronic devices, and I took a deep breath as I began to review what I had planned for the rest of the class. The slides seemed somewhat more familiar, and I had hope that my shoulders might become less tense and lay back down.

After the break, I glanced at the students' faces to make sure they were all mentally present and strangely realized that I had not really looked at them since class began. I had been too consumed with what I now realized I had been doing: performing—and not very well. I pulled a chair in front of the class, sat down, and talked to my students. I saw them as individuals—their human expressions of affect, experience, and social conventions, and I felt silly for the time I spent presenting myself to the classroom of chairs rather than interacting with the human beings who sat in front of me. It was no wonder I had felt so stiff and disoriented. Now I placed my focus on them rather than myself, and I could not believe what we had been missing.

I did not have to wait long; the students sensed my comfort and responded with their own. They asked questions, shared personal experiences, and provided insight into the topics we were reviewing. Had I not struggled so much that day, I imagine it would have been a great deal longer before I realized the significance that the connection I make with my students has on our teaching and learning.

Once She Fumbles, She'll Want to Self-Reflect

As my students were settling in the classroom before one of our mid-semester classes had officially begun, I heard two of my students speaking about another instructor. They were complaining about their perception of her class as unchallenging. One student alleged that he received an A after not being present for many classes and putting little effort into assignments. I was not familiar with the name of the teacher they were referring to, but this did not seem like a new complaint or one unique to the university.

It is not uncommon to hear social workers express that some of their social work classes were “easy A’s” and otherwise unchallenging, especially during their undergraduate years. This deficiency in rigorousness, common in social work coursework, is conceptualized by some in the field as a lack of gatekeeping for the profession (Tam, 2004). My experience has been that at least part of this pattern in social work education is due to the instructors themselves being the caring, understanding social workers we all have come to appreciate for these very qualities. As social work practitioners, our role is frequently to work very diligently towards opening gates for others so as to allow them access to the opportunities they otherwise would have missed. It would follow that many social work instructors attempt to make their students' loads a little lighter, their work a little less demanding, and their degrees a little easier to attain. As social work educators, however, we are gatekeepers into the field of social work. As such, we must first consider the competency, rather than the misfortune, of our students, as it is our responsibility to make sure that only those who are absolutely prepared for the roles with which they will be entrusted pass through the gates. This dual role dilemma for social work educators is controversial in the field (Tam, 2004), and it is especially worrisome due to the great responsibilities that our students, these future social workers, will eventually carry.

Regardless, many instructors struggle with “being too easy” on students against making excessive demands, and many have trouble finding an appropriate balance of their roles as educators and representatives of the profession. In some ways this issue is not unique to social work. A common complaint from students in research-based education in general is that certain

instructors are very knowledgeable in their field but are difficult to follow as educators. This role imbalance can fundamentally decrease teaching effectiveness (Bulger, Mohr, & Walls, 2002). In the field of social work, this can take form as instructors who have remained helpers rather than become educators.

This trap may be especially difficult to avoid given the relatively high percentage of social work students who have themselves experienced many of the psychosocial difficulties that social work clients face (Rompf & Royse, 1994), further blurring the lines for unmindful instructors between students and clients and thus between educators and helpers. There are no naturally inherent differences between our clients and our students. The difference is in our relationship to them. It is our responsibility to create and maintain the distinction.

Given the potential for this trap, I was especially cautious when making decisions in the classroom regarding exceptions for students and other relatively subjective matters. One student, for example, had the lowest grade in the course, rarely participated in discussions, and often seemed withdrawn from teachings. He had experienced the deaths of two close family members within a short period of time before and during our course. Despite my efforts to reach out to him, he did not show any interest in discussing his performance in the course with me.

I recognized in becoming an educator that I would have students who would not do well in my classes, but I somehow failed to consider how much I might empathize with the reasons for their underperformances. Deprived of this student's willingness to communicate, I struggled with my role and responsibilities to the students' future clients, the other students in the class, and the young man himself. I had to remind myself that it was possible to connect to and empathize with the students without relinquishing my role as educator, and I decided that the situation presented an opportunity for both of us to learn a bit more about what it is to become a social worker.

When I began taking undergraduate courses in social work, I experienced personal crises as well. Through personal reflection I have realized these crises helped me become more in tune with the skills needed to help others. This young man was not the only student in the class who was experiencing difficulties in life. I wondered if understanding and integrating our own personal struggles into our development as social workers was much more important than I had previously considered. The next week I incorporated a discussion about self-reflection and what it means to be a social worker. The class appeared to find camaraderie and support from one another in these dialogues, and I was able to reflect on these changes with the students.

After She Self-Reflects, She's Going to Take Action

As for grading in general, I struggled with there being a wide range in quality and effort exhibited. The students whose work was most challenging for me to grade simply delivered the most basic products possible in accordance with the guidelines. These were difficult to grade because they had done what was asked with few to no errors or missing information, but they did not exemplify the same quality of thought and effort as others. I had to consider whether it was fair to base my expectations of their efforts on the quality of their peers' work in comparison and what my expectations ought to be considering their level of education.

Further, I struggled with grading students' assignments that were unrefined in terms of grammar and vocabulary. I was largely concerned about penalizing students for the disparities in education that we have in the United States and the fairness of grading students based on what often appeared to be markedly different educational experiences and current skills. Beyond directing students to the campus writing center and other resources, I was at a loss for how to accommodate for educational disparities and uphold high academic expectations.

I decided to continue to pursue my original ideal for the class. My goal was not to evaluate the students simply by their academic performance in my classroom, but by their demonstrated potential performance as social workers. I looked at the papers thinking not of the students I would see in class the following week but of the clients they would need to help. What did the students need to demonstrate to show that they were becoming effective social workers, as helpers and as advocates? Looking at their work through this lens reminded me of the larger picture and tremendously eased my worries and qualms.

Then She'll Recall Her Purpose... and Ask for Another Class Next Semester

Throughout the course, I reflected a great deal on decisions I was making in teaching, evaluating, and grading. I had days when I felt I was making better decisions than others. I made mistakes, and I improved. I agonized over each decision. But at the end of the semester, I wondered if all the time and worry I put into the past months was so necessary after all.

At the end of our last meeting, I was fortunate enough to have multiple students thank me personally for the class, and I felt a gratification similar to that which I felt at times during my work as a social worker. I thought of my indirect impact on my students' future clients, and I thought of my impact on my students themselves. I thought of my identity as a social worker and of my responsibility as an educator. And I was glad I struggled so much.

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